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ON PAGE 14 (SECTION I)

CHICAGO TRIBUNE

25 January 1981

Bound and beaten, captives spoke mostly of revenge

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Chicago Tribune Press Service

WIESBADEN, Germany—Shortly after he was taken hostage in Iran, Clair Barnes was told by his Iranian guards that he had been sentenced to 25 years in prison by a revolutionary court.

The Iranians never announced a trial for any of their 52 American hostages, and whether one was actually held in Barnes' case is unknown.

But in any event, Barnes shrugged off the information.

"Hell, at least I know how long I'm going to be here," he told himself.

Barnes, a code clerk at the U.S. Embassy in Tehran when it was seized in November, 1979, began serving his "sentence" in a large, empty basement room of the Embassy that was sealed off from the rest of the building.

He called it "The Mushroom Inn."

AT TIMES HE was forced to wear only a towel. He and his fellow hostages weren't allowed to talk to one another for 4½ months.

When they finally could speak, their conversations focused on three topics: sex, revenge, and privacy.

Barnes recounted his experiences in Iran in a tape-recorded conversation this week with a patient at the U.S. military hospital in Wiesbaden where he and the 51 Americans who shared his ordeal have stayed since their release Tuesday.

He gave permission for details of the conversation to be published exclusively in The Tribune. In the conversation, Barnes discussed his capture, his treatment by the Iranians, and the movement of hostages to other parts of the country that occurred after the failed American rescue attempt last April 25.

WHEN THE Embassy was seized, he said, political officer Elizabeth Ann Swift ran down a hallway and told the code clerks to send a message to Washington advising officials there of what was happening.

"She was out in the hall when we closed the vault door," he said, referring to the room where communications equipment was kept.

"We destroyed all the classified equipment and information, and stalled one of the terrorists who was outside the vault with one of our security officers.

"We tried stalling because the terrorists said, 'If you don't open the door,

out. After destroying all the classified equipment and information down to the last tack, we opened the door."

BARNES' FRIEND and fellow code clerk, Phillip Ward, interrupted at that point.

"The Iranians didn't get a thing, not even a carbon copy," he said. "When we opened the door, we got our asses kicked, but it didn't matter because we got our job done. They could do anything they wanted to with us. They were so [angry], they were pathetic."

Barnes continued the narrative:

"They took us over to the ambassador's residence. They kept saying to us that they were doctors operating on a cancer in their country. But they were as confused as we were.

"They had some people there the first day who may or may not have been Arab terrorists, but they were not Iranians.

"This one guy was really proficient with the shotguns that they procured from the Marines. And he was showing the ex-students, or whatever you want to call them, how to operate them. For the first night, they didn't really know what they were doing. They just wanted to keep all of us under observation.

"THEY HAD OUR hands and feet tied, and wouldn't let us sleep without having our hands visible. I was tied up with nylon rope, which was very uncomfortable and took all the hair off my wrists for the first three months. Later, on I got handcuffs and preferred them to the rope.

"They would untie our hands when we ate or went to the bathroom, but sometimes they would forget. So we refused to eat until they came around and untied us. Sometimes we wouldn't tell them we were untied. We felt we were getting away with something."

In the early stages of their captivity, Barnes said, the hostages were in the dark as to how then-President Jimmy Carter was handling their plight.

"But we wanted action," he said. "After a while, it got to a point where we would rather take a risk and get out of there and get it over with, rather than just sit there and never know when we were going to leave."

HE SAID THE hostages were "dehumanized" by being forced to wear only towels much of the time, and by having to ask for everything.

Once, Barnes saw an Iranian guard hang a bracket for a television monitor camera in the bathroom, and asked what he was doing. The Iranian explained, and Barnes joked to the Iranian that he must have a perverted reason for installing a camera in the bathroom.

"Five minutes later, they came to get me and put me in the solitary room," he said. "I told them I was joking and they took me back to my room."

He began thinking about escape. But finally he concluded that the odds against a successful escape were too great.

"I'd have to go past all the guards and all the hostages," he said. "I didn't really know how many guards there were. And if I could have escaped from the basement area, I would have been in the compound area.

"They had a lot of people out there. The last thing I heard before they put me in the basement was all these fanatics cheering and demonstrating outside the compound.

"I ALSO THOUGHT, 'If I did make it out of the compound area, where would I go?' I didn't speak the language and I didn't know where the Canadian Embassy was."

Later, when the American rescue attempt failed, Barnes was transferred to another town and put in a maximum security cell in a prison.

"They blindfolded us and put a blanket over our heads, and put us in a van," he said. "Then they stepped all over us while putting tapes on the windows so no one could see in.

"They took us to a place and got us upstairs in this building. It seemed as if I was being pushed into a phone booth, because the door frame touched me on both sides.

"A guy pulled a blanket off my head, and my blindfold fell off. I was looking at a wall 8 to 10 feet ahead of me, and the same distance across, with a pallet on the floor.

"In the corner was a commode, and next to the door a little portable sink, the kind that folded up. And that was it, except for a 25-watt light in a corner that stayed on whenever they had power."

TWO DAYS LATER, Barnes and other hostages were put aboard a plane and flown to Mashhad in northwest Iran. They were confined in the Chamber of Commerce building.